15
The Participation Forum*

November 30, 1995

Topic: What Participation Means in Disasters and Conflicts

Mary Anderson, the principal presenter at the fifteenth Participation Forum, argued that participation in the provision of disaster assistance may be a risky proposition —especially in conflict situations—but it is always possible. The well-known author and consultant on development strategies in emergency situations provided snapshots of what participation looks like in emergency assistance. When authentic participation seems impossible, she stated, it is usually because all possible options have not been considered.

Anderson's ideas gave rise to a discussion that spilled out into the hallway after the meeting. The flavor of the give and take is captured in the summary of the discussion and E-mail comments, many by persons with extensive experience in negotiating this tricky terrain.

Doug Stafford, AA/Bureau for Humanitarian Response, kicked off the spirited session by contending that the "first wave" of a man-made disaster is not a time for participation.

— Diane La Voy, Senior Policy Advisor for Participatory Development

Role of Participation Varies by Type of Disaster

Doug Stafford

The role of participation in conflicts and disasters depends upon the type of disaster. In natural disasters quite a lot can be done in terms of participation and training. USAID has been extraordinarily successful in this area. For example, in Bangladesh USAID developed an early-warning system for typhoons and built typhoon shelters that can be used on a regular basis for other purposes. These have saved thousands of lives. Information gathered from talking to Bangladeshis who have been through these storms helps USAID to improve its efforts.

The Participation Forum is a series of monthly noontime meetings for USAID personnel to explore how to put into practice the Administrator's mandate to "build opportunities for participation into the development processes in which we are involved" ("Statement of Principles on Participatory Development," November 16, 1993). Guest speakers from in and outside of USAID describe their experiences and enter into a general discussion of the theme of the session. A summary of the meeting is disseminated within USAID by E-mail, and readers are encouraged to engage in an E-mail dialogue. E-mail should be directed to Diane La Voy, using either the USAID directory or INTERNET, as DLAVOY@USAID.GOV. Printed copies of the Forum summaries will be distributed to participants and attendees from outside of USAID and others interested in participatory development. The Office of Health and Nutrition's Environmental Health Project (EHP) arranges logistics, maintains the mailing list, and prepares the Forum summaries.

Paul Bell, whom I have known since the Peace Corps in the 1960s, has devoted himself to training many countries in the handling of natural disasters. This summer, in dealing with a volcano eruption on Montserrat, within 48 hours Paul arrived on the scene and told me that everything was under control. What he meant was that he had trained this group of people before; they had been trained in volcanoes specifically. USAID went in with a volcanologist and wired the volcano to see what it was going to do next, but all of the evacuation plans had been thought out several years before. The people in charge in Montserrat knew what to do.

The situation is different in the first few days of a man-made disaster. An example is Goma in Zaire. In the space of five or six days, a million refugees from Rwanda pouredinto a moonscape type of setting, where water, food, sanitation, and camp organization became problems almost immediately. In such a situation the task is to coordinate the international agencies that have come to help—to make sure that everything is covered. Once you're through that first wave, the way the camps are set up makes a whale of a difference in how they are going to be run. For example, it is preferable for the women to run food distribution. There's a time for participation, but not until the emergency has stabilized.

The Lessons and Challenges of Participation in Disasters

Mary Anderson

Participation means different things to different people. As I reviewed "The Participation Forum" summaries before preparing this presentation, I was struck at the number of different uses to which the term "participation" is put. We may struggle to understand the concept of participation, but deep in our hearts and souls, we know it's a good idea and are committed to it. We know that people have a right to participate in decisions that make a difference in their lives. We also realize from a practical viewpoint that if people participate in projects and programs, they take ownership of them and accept responsibility for producing results. Yet in any given situation, it may be a struggle to understand the role that participation can play.

At the heart of the issue of participation is the outsider-insider relationship—donor-recipient, programmer-beneficiary. When people with resources—and that includes both physical things and managerial competence and so on—join with people who need resources—the poor, the disadvantaged, the unempowered—to try to change the status and the prospects of the latter group, participation is the key to whether the effort succeeds or doesn't succeed at all. This is nowhere more obvious than in disasters, both natural and human.

Lesson One: Participation Is Always Possible

The first lesson I've learned about the role of participation in the difficult settings of disasters and conflicts is that it is possible always, everywhere, and under every circumstance, to provide emergency assistance in ways that rely on and promote the participation of the people receiving the aid. That's a flat-footed lesson.

You may wonder how I can claim this with such determination and insistence. I think I can claim it because of experiences I've been through. About 10 years ago, some of us working in disaster assistance asked ourselves how we could provide emergency assistance in disaster situations in a way that would promote rather than undermine long-term development and that would leave people better off instead of more dependent. We found, through a study of 45 cases in different places in the world,

that the prevalent disaster response focuses on the needs that people have in a disaster and emphasizes urgency, time, and efficiency to meet those needs and to save lives. The primary motivation is to be accountable to the people providing the resources. That's the dominant paradigm of disaster response.

Nonetheless, we also found that some agencies and individuals were able to do more, without sacrificing the sense of urgency and compassion for saving lives. From very early on in a situation, almost from day one, these agencies and individuals recognized the existing capacities of the people who were suffering from the dislocation or the problems of the disaster, the so-called victims, and relied on and supported those capacities as they developed the emergency-response system. Therefore, the people who received the aid participated in the decisions about their own relief assistance. This is not a theory. We observed it in practice in place after place.

Five Snapshots of What Participation in Disasters Looks Like

What does participation in disaster assistance look like? It does not look like a series of long meetings in which everyone explains and identifies their needs and in which they together, as a group, identify strategies for meeting those needs—those meetings that we all know about. Neither does it look like lengthy, involved, ethnographic studies: information-gathering enterprises in which donors try to get information about the environment in order to be sensitive to local culture and traditions and so on.

To describe what it does look like, I will give five examples and then step back and explain what I think they have in common.

- **Example One:** In the Philippines, after the Mt. Mayon volcano eruption, a small group of field staff people from an NGO moved into the shelters with the dislocated people and started holding public events each evening. Some of the events were simply fun; others were meetings where the people organized themselves and made collective plans for their return home that would enable them better to withstand future disasters as a community.

- **Example Two:** An international consultant was asked by a U.S. NGO to travel to Central America to assess housing needs after an earthquake. When he arrived, local people gathered around him to inquire what kind of housing the NGO was going to provide. Instead of making promises, he asked them to take him on a walking tour of the town and, as they walked together, he asked them why this building was damaged, why another fell, why another remained standing, etc. The people answered from their experience—because this one was built weakly, that one was not reinforced, this was built with solid materials, etc. At the end of this “tour,” the consultant told the people that they already had the knowledge of how to build well in their setting and, rather than supplying new houses, designed by some outside expert, he recommended that his NGO simply provide support to these people to rebuild their own houses.

- **Example Three:** A feeding programs in an Ethiopia drought provided food to people near their homes rather than in a feeding center, in order to ensure that they carried on with “normal” life and were ready to replant as soon as rains came. A feeding program in Somalia during the war hired a commercial enterprise to transport food through warring lines since this commercial firm was well-connected and able to ensure delivery without theft.

- **Example Four:** In southern Tajikistan, the international staff of an NGO that was involved in reconstruction of damaged housing relied on self-appointed village committees of older women

who took it upon themselves to mediate housing disputes that came up when Garmi refugees returned to their homes to find they had been occupied, while they were absent, by Kulyabi people.

- **Example Five:** In a recent program arranged by UNHCR, Rwandan refugee women from one refugee camp were taken to a new camp to meet with the women there. Those from the first camp were able to share the experience they had in establishing a system for welcoming newcomers and for monitoring the impacts of aid (who was getting it and who was not) in their camp so that the women, in the new area, could set up a similar system.

Common Themes

These five examples show what participation looks like in a crisis situation. What common themes could be drawn from these examples that would help us get a handle on the issue of participation in disasters?

First, the promotion of participation depends on an attitude more than a set of events and facts. Participation grows out of a deep respect for the people who are already in the setting and a recognition that local people have capacities and are trying to cope. In fact, all who work in disasters know that the immediate response in a disaster is handled by local people. When outside relief arrives, a lot of good stuff is already happening in every disaster situation.

The second theme is that participation fits into what is happening. Disaster response workers with a participation bent look at who's in the situation and what's happening with them. They do not come in with preconceptions about what is needed or with ideas for setting up new systems. They ask, “What's already going on here? Where are things happening now?”

The third common theme is future orientation. In each example, the approach linked what existed before the crisis and what would remain after the crisis. The interventions in the examples were not time-bound. In southern Tajikistan, disaster workers may have been there briefly reconstructing housing, but they understood that the residents were going to live there a long time, and tension between the Garmi and the Kulyabi was going to last a long time. That is why they chose to work with the village committees.

The fourth common theme is an increase in people's awareness of their own efficacy. Participating in local disaster response efforts gave local people a sense that they were doing something that was worth doing. The outside agency legitimized what they were doing, gave it some support, came in behind it. That, of course, made the people feel able to do more. When people find they can succeed at one thing, they know they can succeed at other things.

Lesson Two: Participation Is Practical and Principled

The second lesson is that it is inexcusable not to include participation in disaster assistance from both a practical and a principled perspective. Practically speaking, if participation is possible, why not do it? We know that a better, longer-term outcome ensures ownership and saves resources up front.

From the perspective of principle, if disaster assistance personnel know that omitting participation leaves people worse off than they were before aid was given them, then it is their moral obligation to be mindful of and sensitive about the role of participation.

Participation in Conflict Settings: Pitfalls and Challenges

When one enters into a conflict situation—in particular, civilian-based civil wars—a number of things change in the participation formula and present a challenge to all of us. I have spent the last year and a half trying to figure out how we can provide better international assistance in conflict. Is it possible to help local people take ownership of the processes even in a conflict situation?

The first stage of that work led me to write a paper called "The Negative Impacts of International Assistance in Conflict Situations." The discouraging finding of the paper is that international assistance in conflict situations, even when it is effective on its mandated terms, at the same time often exacerbates and reinforces the conflict. The negative effect is brought about in two ways.

The first is through resource transfers. Stories about resources being taxed or stolen by warring parties or used to free up local resources to support warring parties are well known. In other words, the outside resources help pay for the war and reinforce inter-group competition to gain power and control over others. Resources represent power in conflict situations. When resources are introduced into a resource-scarce environment where people are in conflict with each other, those resources become a part of the conflict.

The second way is through the implicit messages carried by conditions under which aid must be provided in conflict situations. I call these the implicit ethical messages of aid. For example, if we hire armed guards to deliver humanitarian assistance or negotiate with warring parties for access to the people who are in need, in essence we are saying that it is legitimate for arms to decide who gets access to aid. While our explicit message is that everybody has the right to assistance, the implicit message is more troublesome.

In the effort that I'm engaged in right now we're trying to find out if there is a way to provide aid in conflict situations without exacerbating the conflict. Are there examples where people have done something else? What can we learn?

Looking Harder for Options

We are finding that the choices about how to deliver assistance are loaded in conflict situations. They are loaded politically and in terms of balance of power.

We're trying to develop a diagnostic tool that people can use in the field, which will help them find out who gains and who loses given certain choices. If we decide to do one thing to deliver aid in a specific conflict situation, who is going to gain and who is going to lose? Knowing this will help them make better choices. We find there are always options. One should think through options a, b, c, ... until an option is found that yields the best outcome.

It is difficult to admit, but in a conflict situation where warring parties are in control, it may be better not to have participation, because those who participate are legitimized or empowered in the process. In Goma, UNHCR people said to me, "But, Mary, we did what you always said. We worked with local leaders." But the local leaders in Goma were the Hutu who had just committed the genocide. I had not said to UNHCR people that they should work with any local leader; the analysis that we use suggests ways of thinking through who any leaders are and who they represent. In conflict settings, one should be careful about reinforcing leadership that is engaged in war. The point is that, in such a setting, simple "participation" might make things worse.

In spite of the inherent dangers, there are opportunities for participation even in conflict situations. These exist because in all societies there are local capacities for peace, people who are trying to disengage from the conflict, who think that the conflict makes no sense, is not solving any problems,

and is being perpetuated by opportunistic leaders or bandits. Those people often get silenced in conflict situations. But they are there.

International assistance can be provided in conflict situations in a way that provides space and opportunity for the peaceful people, that enables them to participate in creating new space for disengaging from the conflict and setting up alternative systems for solving the problems that the conflict is putatively there to solve.

These opportunities are probably not to be found among existing leadership in conflict situations because the leaders represent the warring factions. To see the opportunities, one must take a giant step back in the conflict situation and see who is going to gain, who is going to lose, and where the options are for participation.

DISCUSSION SESSION

The Difficulty of Understanding Conflict Situations

Nan Borton: Ninety-five percent of OFDA (Office of Disaster Assistance) resources go into conflict situations in which the persons with whom we are working are themselves hostages of the sides in the conflict. The more advice we can get about how to provide assistance in a way that does not endanger people the better.

There seems to be an assumption that those who provide the assistance understand the conflict situation, but I believe that in most conflict situations the relatively helpless and frequently uninformed include those who are providing assistance—and not just the PVOs, but the donors as well. The conflict situations we face are so complex and such a long time in the making that disaster assistance personnel may not appreciate the effects of their actions.

In thinking about our work, we should keep in mind that anarchy and peace (or development and disaster) are on a continuum. We need to recognize that disaster assistance is an event in a much larger process.

Participation in Needs Assessment

Mike Mahdesian: I first got into disaster assistance during the Armenian earthquake in 1988. I noticed that a lot of people with good will tried to push assistance on people without knowing what was going on or what was needed. For example, many churches sent over donated shoes or clothes or cans of Campbell's soup that weren't needed and that clogged up the arteries of the relief networks and prevented essential materials from reaching Armenia.

When I got into USAID, I was happy to see that OFDA had a long practice of doing assessment training. OFDA was constantly battling people in other departments that had ideas about what should be provided in a given disaster situation but that had not done their needs-assessment homework. The idea of participation in the sense of talking to people to find out what the needs are and what is culturally sensitive or likely to cause dependency is ingrained in practice.

Alternatives to Working with Illegitimate Political Leadership

Rick Barton: How can we avoid working with illegitimate political leadership? In OTI (Office of Transition Initiatives), we'll work with any group that we think has some of the power of the people behind it. But it is a little bit like “the Force”: such groups are hard to identify at times. How do you reach the captive majority?

Mary Anderson: My reaction is that we need to work harder to identify options. It is important to think of every possible way to work in the situation that might do less to legitimize the illegitimate government. For example, if you are making decisions about how to deliver food, you might try to think of the possible ways to deliver food. Doug Stafford mentioned an interesting way: delivering it through the systems in the society that food for consumption usually gets delivered through; that is, through women. In African society, women are responsible for household food, by and large, and men are responsible for cash crops. If you distribute food through women, at least the implicit message is that this food is for household consumption. If you deliver it through men, the implicit message is that the food is related to markets and power and income. Food can be delivered through commercial firms that may or may not be party to the illegitimate government.

The point is that we are far too quick to say that we don't have any options. If there is really no choice but an illegitimate group, then maybe the choice is to say we shouldn't work in that situation. If what we're doing is so bad, maybe we shouldn't do it.

Diane La Voy: What options have any of you considered that may move you away from a losing situation?

Rick Barton: In Liberia, the government has been illegitimate for so long that now the only way to get peace is to have the warlords be part of the government in waiting. We are trying to finesse that problem and see if there is some way to move into a community-based design that may get some of those resources that are now held captive in greater Monrovia. It's an interesting design, but we run up against the apolitical traditions of many disaster relief people: we are saving lives; we don't do politics. It's hard to push politics out, even though there is a great desire to do it on the part of the various NGOs on the ground. The public is perhaps ready to express itself, but still people are insecure. If they speak out now, they will probably die. So our offering them liberation may be a bit premature.

The Impossibility of Pure Humanitarian Assistance

Linda Howey: I see a paradox or a conundrum in the notions that we should be providing disaster assistance apart from the political context and that participation therefore may not work in all instances. I cannot think of an instance where there isn't some sort of participation, where we are not sending some sort of ethical message. Can we actually deliver “pure” humanitarian assistance? Because there is no such thing as purehumanitarian assistance, we have to have options. We really have to think about what we are doing in a different way. We are embodying participation to some degree or another, I would reckon, in every situation in which we're operating.

Nan Borton: I would disagree with Linda. There are areas—I'm thinking particularly of Rwandan refugees—where the programs are going forward in a totally nonparticipatory fashion or in a pseudo or semi or sort of superficially participatory fashion because the populations are not free. The populations are under military control in the refugee camps themselves.

Diane La Voy: I will ask Mary to have the last word briefly, and this is very much too bad, but we do have to be out of the room early today. And all additional comments, we will just troop down to our office, and you can talk further with Mary if you'd like to there.

Mary Anderson: I am thinking of “participation” more as a way that we're recognizing capacities and relying on those capacities to make things happen. Sometimes it may be preferable for the external agency to keep decision-making within its own control. That may help local people who want to disengage from the power struggle to find the space they need to develop new options and alternatives.

First: Do No Harm

Mary Anderson: We cannot empower people. Outsiders never empower people, but they can certainly disempower them. Likewise, outsiders cannot liberate people or fix their governments or design their master plans, but they can certainly make things worse. In disaster assistance, we are stuck in a place where we can never get it all right. We can certainly get it all wrong. We are trying to minimize the damage that we do and support local people so that they can do the good stuff. In some sense it's not ours to do.

Communications from the E-Mail Bag

The e-mail bag for Participation Forum 15 was full even before the session was held. The announcement of the seminar was enough to start many thinking and commenting about participation in disaster situations.

Pre-Forum Comments

Importance of Local NGOs and Community Groups

John P. Grant: "The barriers to local participation are many in both disaster and conflict situations. In both, your typical local and community organizational structures may well have broken down as a result of the situation, so new bases for participation have to be established. In conflict situations there is the added factor of fear and suspicion, and sometimes hostility, of some groups. One of the challenges for the USAID worker is to maintain the appearance of neutrality, and not get identified with one side or another. In any conflict or post-conflict situation the aid worker faces the challenge of winning the confidence and trust of the local population. I certainly faced this in a small way in Haiti right after Aristide was reinstated—people on both sides wanted to be reassured about me and my motives before talking frankly about their situation.

"Clearly one of the solutions to the participation problem for the outsider coming in (who is inherently an unknown and source of suspicion), is to try to identify those key people in the local community who are leaders and/or have the confidence of important segments of the local population, and can mobilize local participation working with the outside aid worker."

Brian Williams: Local NGOs need to be brought into the loop sooner as emergencies evolve. The justification for international NGOs doesn't last much beyond a month or two, but they tend to last forever. Everyone knows that although all NGOs (or at least most) have a genuine humanitarian motivation, they also "use" emergencies to some extent to achieve secondary objectives."

Ruth Buckley: "Information and dialogue are critical from day one of our involvement because individuals are never only victims. Rather all people have their own perceptions and priorities to offer and everyone makes specific choices based on their own assessment of the situation.

"In addition to ignoring the local context in our haste to 'save lives,' we too often attempt to establish committees to do our work (monitor commodities we deliver in a way that is acceptable to us) and then claim we have had local participation. We also get annoyed or cut off funding because our rules, priorities or standards are not adhered to. We rarely take the time to establish ground rules and benchmarks that are fully understood, let alone ones which have been developed in a participatory manner.

"We are also now encouraging U.S.-based NGOs to develop partnerships with local NGOs. However, rather than true partnerships, local NGOs are again being asked to conform to our standards and are being assisted according to western models, to use western systems, and define problems and solutions in western terms. We end up with NGOs which can deliver emergency assistance according to our rules and regulations cheaper than U.S.-based NGOs but in a manner which is not necessarily appropriate or representative and may be little understood by the local population. Rather than promoting this type of partnership shouldn't we be looking at empowering local populations to participate with us on their own terms and in areas they deem important?"

Arthur Silver: "The single most successful program I have seen in over three decades (!) in AID is the Guatemala earthquake reconstruction program. The key to its success was resisting the political power of US PVOs wanting to do their usual thing, and make them work with empowered local ag cooperatives doing THEIR own thing."

Barry Burnett: "NIS: Feb. 1992: Following the breakup of the Soviet Union, the U.S. wanted to dramatize its support for the former republics as they undertook difficult economic and political reforms. Operation Provide Hope was launched and was highly successful in providing food and medical supplies.

"I was assigned to the Republic of Turkmenistan. The involvement of NGOs was substantial and made a difference in terms of reaching the neediest groups and ensuring accountability of the commodities (food and medicine) in question. These groups insisted that the supplies be distributed to townships at some distance from the capital of Ashkhabad. Indeed, we were flown to these outlying regions at the host government's expense, to ascertain need and ensure delivery. Local units of the NGOs made the necessary arrangements so that we could inspect facilities housing older people, orphans, and sick people...some of the most vulnerable groups in the country. When the supplies were delivered, these same local organizations assured the delivery and accountability of the food and medicine to the target groups. Although we had no formal diplomatic relations with Turkmenistan at that time, the cooperation could not have been better by both the host government and the NGOs."

Opportunities for Improving Life Skills in Refugee Camps

Helen Soos: "Many human resources are congregated at refugee camps. It is a perfect opportunity for involving people in obtaining life skills (while they have few competing demands for their time), such as literacy, family health, child survival, reproductive health; gardening, nutrition, natural resources management, better use of fuel wood, planting/protecting trees, etc. There could be food-for-work motivations. There could be women's empowerment, discussions about traditions which are coming apart, community development. The areas where refugee camps are set up could benefit from these activities, and then people could implement some of these things when they get back to their communities. There are many opportunities, some of which could reduce the cost of maintaining the camps. We cannot provided subsidized support to all the refugee situations that keep erupting. And for countries which cannot feed their people but which have income, such as Angola with oil and mineral revenue, some of our relief services should be cost-reimbursable. They have less incentive to resolve conflicts when the USG takes care of their people."

Participation in Disaster Preparedness

Steven Sharp: "Participation in disaster planning, mitigation and preparedness is an issue that is of particular interest to me. Engendering participation to prepare for an event which may never occur is particularly difficult. Urban Programs and OFDA, through a memorandum of understanding, have been working together on shelter and urban aspects of disasters. One project in Caribbean involves (among other activities) the organization of an NGO/private sector network in the Dominican Republic to have a response mechanism in place in the event of a disaster."

Learning about the Local Culture

Arthur Silver: "I wonder if there is time, in disaster/conflict situations (or at least in the protracted ones) to contract—or better, a quick work order under an IQC—for a summary anthropological literature search, to find whatever might be relevant and useful in the affected area, e.g., traditional dispute resolution practices, food preferences, volatile ethnic mixes, etc. Might save a lot of money in the medium term."

Looking Back: Comment on Forum 14 on Listening Harder through Rapid Appraisals

Barry Burnett: "Cost of Rapid Appraisals: I would respectfully disagree with the participant who argued that $25,000 was a "high cost," particularly if OE-funded. We have typically spent multiples of $25,000 for project and program design work, often carried out by consultants paid from program resources (PD&S). Leaving aside the funding source question, I think this level of funding is quite reasonable to gain an appreciation of the customer's needs and perspectives. While the OE account is indeed tight, we should not sacrifice objective, customer-based design work over a modest investment of this magnitude. We should also keep in mind that we will probably be allowed to use up to $25 million in program funds for OE purposes.

"Partnerships with Donors: I do not believe the guidelines on strategic objective teams have been drawn so tightly that we can't accommodate a range of options for interfacing and engaging partners in a common intervention. In any event, we should gain more experience and inputs from other operating units before considering revisions to the current operations system guidelines.